

Mary of Nazareth – Disciple of the Gospel

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It is early February as I write and it is cold and windy. You can imagine my surprise when I discovered under the shelter of our cherry tree some daffodils in full flower. A reminder that Spring is on the way. In March we celebrate The Annunciation of the Lord. This year the feast has special poignancy, as it is a Millennium year. The old English name for this feast is Lady Day. On this day we remember Mary not just because she was the mother of Jesus but also because she was the first to follow Jesus. She was her Son's first disciple.

What do we mean by discipleship?

A disciple is one who hears, sees and obeys the Word. Mary did that and more. In the sermon on the plain in Luke's Gospel Jesus says "Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and obey it" (11:28). A faithful disciple must listen, understand and put into practice. This is a demand of the Gospel. So a disciple of Jesus is one who is prepared for the coming of the Kingdom. Luke clearly sees Mary as such a person. At her annunciation, Mary listened to the angel. Though she may not have understood fully at that time what was being asked of her, she obeyed. She was an obedient servant of the Gospel from the very beginning. Mary is "blessed" not just because she is the mother of Jesus but because she was an obedient servant of the Gospel.

Faith and hope

At the annunciation Mary became the first disciple. The Holy Spirit came upon her and she accepted the consequences. The Holy Spirit "overshadowed" her at Nazareth. When she agreed to become the mother of Jesus she entered into the unknown. That took faith. She did not know how Joseph, his family or the wider community would react. She said to the angel, "I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me". Mary is a figure of hope for all women. In the Gospel of Luke there is an emphasis upon those who are disadvantaged. For Luke they are the ones who clearly perceive and accept the Gospel. Mary clearly did. She pondered and treasured these things in her heart.

The Old and the New

The story of the Annunciation of Jesus in Luke's Gospel is part of a carefully prepared plan that compares the conception and birth of Jesus to that of John the Baptist. The comparison begins with the annunciation by an angel to Zechariah, John's father, in the Temple where he was performing religious duties. He was in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place in the Temple where he received a vision of an angel. However, he was unable to believe that his elderly wife would bear a son; so the angel deprived him of his speech. He must have been aware that Sarah, the spouse of Abraham, bore a son in her old age at God's intervention. But this priest from the establishment with all his knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures in the splendour of the Temple could not accept the message of the angel. This is paralleled with the annunciation to a humble girl in an Israelite backwater. The lack of faith of Zechariah is compared to the faith of Mary. In the past men usually received revelations from God but here is a humble woman. The institutional Temple is being replaced by the Temple of the Lord.

Luke is comparing the Old and the New. Mary is a sign of the New Way to God. Mary is part of the New Creation.

Woman of faith

Mary brings the Holy Spirit and the unborn Jesus to Elizabeth and the unborn John. The unborn John leaped in his mother's womb. He greets Jesus before he is even born. Elizabeth is also a woman of faith. She does not have the doubts that her husband has. She and John form a bridge between the Old and New Testament, while Zechariah represents the old temple and is not open as his wife is to the new creation of God. Throughout the Gospel Jesus is rejected by the established church leaders but accepted by the poor and humble. Zechariah is not open to the message of the angel but his wife has faith. She fares better as a believer than Zechariah does. Throughout the Gospel Luke emphasises the faith of women as disciples. It is not surprising that it is Elizabeth who is the first to address Jesus as Lord. The *Magnificat* is Mary's great hymn of praise and it is a song of the poor. It is about reversal: the proud are scattered; the powerful are dethroned, while the lowly are lifted up and the hungry are filled with good things.

Disciple and witness

We see in both the Gospels of Luke and John that the theme of discipleship is important. It is not a surprise to see how they have developed Mary as disciple and as a witness. In John, the mother of Jesus is important because she was a model of discipleship and witness. At the foot of the cross she is regarded as the mother of all believers. The words of the angel can be contrasted with the instructions given by the mother of Jesus to the servants at Cana: "Do whatever he tells you". As a disciple she had complete faith in Jesus. In the past these words were a reminder of her role as an intercessor. Above all Mary is an example of one who accepted what God asked of her and shared her Son with everyone.

Sharing the blessing

Luke places the story of the meeting of Mary and her family with Jesus (8:19-21) after the parable of the sower and of the lamp. For Luke, Mary is an image of the good seed who was the first to hear the word and shares her Son who is the Light of the Nations. There is one story that is unique to Luke (11:27-28). A woman in the crowd raised her voice and said "Happy the womb that bore you and the breasts you sucked". But he replied, "still happier are those who hear the word of God and keep it". Mary is blessed but so are those who hear the word of God and keep it. This of course includes Mary. Mary is blessed not just because she was the mother of Jesus but also because she heard the word and acted upon it. This is also a reminder of two blessed's in the account of the Visitation. "Of all women you are the most blessed, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (1:42). "Yes, blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled" (1:45). In the eyes of Luke Mary is blessed not just because she is the Mother of Jesus but also because when she had faith and shared it with others. A disciple is asked to listen to the Word, to believe and to share it with others. Mary did all this and more. She is not listed by Luke as one of the disciples but it is implied that she was regarded as one.

Open to the Spirit

The last time we hear of Mary is of her presence with some of the women, members of her family and the Eleven waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit in

the Upper Room. In Luke themes are developed such as the Temple, mercy, prayer, discipleship, women followers of Jesus and the importance of the role of the Holy Spirit. In fact, his second book the Acts of the Apostles has been called the gospel of the Holy Spirit as this book consistently refers to the role of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is mentioned frequently in the gospel especially in the early chapters. In the person of Mary all these themes come together. We see why Luke was interested in Mary. She was the faithful disciple who was open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Luke tells of the faith story of Mary from the Annunciation in Nazareth to the Eve of Pentecost in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. He is eager to present Mary as the faithful disciple who accepted the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation, and by her presence in the Upper Room one who was still a faithful follower of Jesus.

The Challenge

Through our Baptism we are called to be followers of Jesus and to proclaim the Gospel in and out of Season. As Carmelites we are following in the footsteps of Jesus. Like Mary, we have to listen, ponder and reflect upon the Word of God. That is our challenge. Mary was ready. Are we?